INTRODUCTION

There is only one origin to Whom, equally, all must return. Life thus becomes a journey, and its measure of happiness and success is the closeness or distance to our Creator. Rather than a religion, *Islam* is a way of life with its guidance charting the coordinates of the map by which the return journey to where we came from can successfully be accomplished. The present booklet intends to be a traveller's handbook for those who like to know where they are and where they are going.

THE ORIGIN OF LIFE

We perceive life through our senses and experience. As such we live in the moment, but the intellect bestowed upon us compels us to link together events, search out the past, and project the future. We know ourselves to be mortal: we have not always been around and are sure to die. Yet something inside us refuses the notion that we are just a temporary blip in the vastness of time.

Darwin's theory of evolution gained currency in Europe because it helped justify colonial expansion and exploitation. It replaced the answerability of mankind to the higher authority of God with the notion of natural selection, which was free of moral constraints, and the idea of the survival of the fittest justified the use of force in subjugating so-called primitive civilisations. Darwin's highly flawed and speculative theory became the myth of our time, a secular variety of religious dogma to explain away all the mysteries of life. The mathematics of chance does not permit the development of higher life forms by random mutation processes in the time space available. As original creation is not a repeatable event, the theory can never be empirically proven and cannot lay any claim to greater scientific validity than the creationist explanations of how life on earth first started. We start our exploration of *Islam's* outlook on life with its account of creation, because this contains the basic moral principles

Islam teaches and wants us to adhere to.

IN SEARCH OF HUMAN POTENTIAL

According to the *Qur'an*, the revelation communicated through the prophet Muhammad *(peace be upon him)*, God created the heavens (multiple universes) and the earth with a purpose and allocated the earth as the place for human habitation. Humanity was not the first creation of intelligent life; angels, created from pure light, and jinn, spirits created from the element of fire, preceded man. In fact, the Creator announces his plan to them prior to creating the prototype of man, Adam *(peace be upon him)*:

> *"When your Lord said to the angels, 'I am going to place a representative on earth',* they said*, 'Are you going to place someone there who will do mischief and spill blood, whilst we (already) sing your praise and glorify you?'* He said*, 'I know what you don't know.' And He taught Adam all the names and then presented (things) to the angels and said: 'tell me the names of these if you are right.'* They said*: 'Glory be to you, we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. You are the Knowledgeable and Wise.'* He said*: 'Oh Adam, tell them their names.' And when he told them their names,* He said*: 'Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of the heavens and the earth and that I know what you let on and what you hide?'*
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> *Qur'an, Surah 2 – Al-Baqarah – ayah 30-33.*

The key difference between the knowledge given to the angels and that given to man is that the angels only know what they have been taught, whereas Adam *(peace be upon him)* was taught all the names, in other words, he was given the power of creative thought and speech, being able to conquer unknown environments in his mind and give a name to things he never encountered before.
The news of this in many ways superior creation did not go down too

well with the angels, for man's abilities can also be used to do great harm to his fellow creatures and the world in which he lives. Nonetheless, the angels, readily submitted and bowed down to Adam *(peace be upon him)*, but *Iblis* (the devil), a *jinn* put in charge of the angels, refused. His objection, however, was not one of principle, but governed by pride, scoffing at the humble origins of man who was created from base material, the soil of the earth, when he, *Iblis* was of a purer, better substance, fire. This original racism, judging others by their make-up and origins rather than their potential, is the prime cause of strife and competition between people today. The devil was reprimanded for his attitude and stripped of his position of honour. He bargained for time to prove that man, on whose account he became rejected, was not worthy of the privilege. He was given until the *Day of Judgment* to try and seduce people from the path designed for them by God, and those whom he would manage to lead astray would go down with him. Thus, the devil becomes the enemy of man, rather than the rival of God as in other religious traditions.

Adam *(peace be upon him)* was given paradise to live in, a place free of want, and for companionship was given a partner from his own make-up, Eve. The complete bliss of paradise was tainted by only one small prohibition: a tree, the fruit of which Adam *(peace be upon him)* and Eve must not eat. Given the abundance of fruit available, this minor restriction should not have mattered much, but the devil succeeded in arousing the couple's ambition, telling them that God only forbade them from eating this fruit to prevent them from becoming angel-like and eternal. The fruit had the opposite effect, however, and made them aware of their nakedness and vulnerability, and as punishment they are sent as mere mortals to live on earth, toiling in hardship to survive. It is said that above God's throne it is written that His mercy overcomes His anger, and in true keeping with that Adam *(peace be upon him)* and Eve were forgiven and provided with guidance which, if

followed, should help them find their way back into paradise. Life on earth then becomes the temporary examination room where the intentions of each and every human being are being tested, whether they follow the guidance which helps them fulfil their true potential of living up to the spirit of God in them as His representatives on earth, or whether they follow the devil into obeying their base desires which betray their humble material make-up. Through religious observance and prayer man can thus rise from an animal-like existence to a level of worthiness above that of the angels. Rather than having evolved from an animal, the animal existence is the fallen state of man when he gives up on searching for and fulfilling his potential as a spiritual being.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD – THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Islamic tradition states that the fear of God is the crown of all knowledge. Just as a chair knows nothing about the carpenter, we are unable to understand or perceive God through our senses. Before the physical creation of each and every one of us, however, He gathered all the souls of the descendants of Adam *(peace be upon him)* and reminded them of their duty to remember Him as their Lord. To help us remember, He sent His guidance through His messengers. We know God as He describes Himself. The name He takes is Allah, which is more than just "God" in Arabic. "God" – just as the Arabic word *"Ilah"* can be put in the plural or change gender; there can be gods and goddesses. Allah, on the other hand, is unique; He has no equal and He shares His name with none else. He was called Allah in the old scriptures, too, in the cousin languages of Arabic, like Hebrew and Aramaic. Readers of Bible translations still find the words Eli (Allah) and Elohim (*Allahumm*, meaning "o Allah"). Besides His name He is known through His attributes, which in the *Qur'an* are also called the most beautiful names of Allah. These attributes tell us more about our Creator, and whilst some are exclusive to Him alone, others are qualities we can aspire to: He is the Just, and we can be just, He is the

Merciful, and we can be merciful, He is the Generous, and we can be generous. The tradition that whoever remembers all the ninety-nine names of Allah will definitely enter paradise means that if we apply the knowledge we have about Allah in our daily lives, our lives will be filled with virtue and crowned with success and reward.

The scope of this booklet is not vast enough to ponder about each of the ninety-nine names. Suffice to say that each of them contains an important truth about life, just as Allah is the ultimate Truth, and from these names derive the guiding principles of Islamic philosophy. The way Allah deals with us, His dependent creation, has a bearing on how we ought to treat each other and the rest of His creation. The link between Creator and created is a direct one that nobody can interfere with. The Creator knows his creatures, He is constantly aware of them, He attends to their needs and listens to their prayers. There is no need for special intermediaries, because He is approachable by everybody, and this equality in our relationship to Him liberates us from being subservient to anybody else, making humanity in the Islamic point of view a community of free people, irrespective of race, heritage, or status. For a Muslim, it is an honour to be a devoted slave of Allah, because his master is the Lord of all the worlds, and none can compete with him. This gives a Muslim his strength and dignity which no-one can take from him.

THE ROLE OF THE MESSENGER

Whereas we need no intercessors to present our prayers to Allah, who is All-Hearing, He is not of this world and does not speak to us directly. Instead of approaching each of His creatures individually with a personalised message, He has chosen messengers of impeccable character to bring His universal message to all of us. The task of these messengers was both to bring the message and to guide by personal example. They would always practice what they preached. In English,

the term prophet is frequently used to describe these people, as part of their job was to warn of the consequences of non-compliance with the instructions of Allah, and this telling of future events or prophecies became a key characteristic in the perception of people. Whilst the messengers were given insights not usually available to other people and were often given miracles in support of their authenticity, it is important to understand that they were not superhuman. If Allah wanted to equip them in this way, He could have sent angels, but for the messengers to be followed, their life example had to be comprehendible; they had to be like everybody else in many respects, so that all who encountered their message would feel that they had the capability of trying to walk in their footsteps. For this reason, messengers were always chosen from amongst their own people, speaking their own language.

Since the days of Adam *(peace be upon him)*, the universal content of the message itself remained unchanged: that there is only one God, Allah, that all depend on Him alone, that righteous conduct was the route to success in His eyes, and that He would judge everybody's deeds on the Day of Reckoning. As mankind evolved through various stages, however, the detailed set of rules accompanying this general message equally evolved. Each messenger, in addition to calling his people to the undivided worship of Allah alone, addressed the major sins and injustices of his time and was such a social reformer by divine command.

Given the many generations of humans on this planet, spread across the vastness of the globe, the number of messengers sent for their guidance and betterment is too great for all their stories to have been preserved. The *Qur'an* mentions only a select number of them by name and tells in detail about their mission, where their example continues to provide beneficial admonition and guidance for us. Messengers were sent to all kinds of communities, but many of those

whose stories are preserved for us were sent to the Children of Israel whom Allah had favoured amongst the nations for many generations. Each messenger takes his place in a long chain of such emissaries, and finally, when the time was right, Allah sent a final messenger to all mankind to revive, confirm and seal His message for the remaining generations of mankind. This messenger was Muhammad, *(peace be upon him)*. Once mankind had reached a stage of development which could guarantee that the message brought by him, the *Qur'an*, would be preserved unchanged and its content would remain valid for all times to come, there will be no further new messenger after him. The messengers mentioned by name in the Qur'an are Adam, Idris, Nuh (Noah), Hud, Salih, Lut (Lot), Ibrahim (Abraham), Ismail (Ishmael), Ishaq (Isaac), Yaqub (Jacob), Yusuf, (Joseph), Shu'ayb (Jethro), Ayyub (Job), Musa (Moses), Harun (Aaron), Dawud (David), Sulayman (Solomon), Yunus (Jonah), Ilyas (Elijah), Al-Yasa (Elisha), Zu-l-Kifl, Zakariya (Zechariah), Yahya (John), Isa (Jesus), and Muhammad, *(peace be with them all)*.

THE LIFE AND MESSAGE OF MUHAMMAD

Muhammad *(peace be upon him)* was born in *Makkah* in Arabia in 570 as an orphan, for his father Abdullah died several weeks before his birth. When he was six, his mother died, too, and he was looked after for two years by his grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, and then, after his death, by his uncle Abu Talib, whom he helped with his trade caravans. His integrity soon earned him the nickname "al-Amin", the Trustworthy. At the age of 25 he worked for the trading business of a wealthy widow, Khadijah who, impressed with his character, proposed marriage. In spite of her being 40 at the time, Muhammad *(peace be upon him)* accepted, and she remained his life companion for 25 years, and they had six children together. After her death he married a young girl, Aisha *(may Allah be peace with her)*, who became an important teacher and narrator of ahadith (sayings of the prophet), as

well as several war widows and divorcees, either to provide them with shelter or to forge political alliances between competing tribes. In turn for the kindness shown to him as a youth, he looked after Ali, the son of his uncle Abu Talib, and he freed and adopted a young slave boy, Zayd bin Haritha, into his household. His family's testimony is that of a caring husband and father who, although busy with the affairs of the community, helped with the household chores wherever he could.

Disliking the idolatrous and frivolous practices of his compatriots in *Makkah*, Muhammad *(peace be upon him)* often retreated to a cave in mount Hira outside the town, and it was there, at the age of 40, that he received the first revelation. These revelations continued for 23 years until the end of the life of Muhammad *(peace be upon him)*, and they are collected in the *Qur'an*, the Muslims' holy book.

Muslims follow the life example of Muhammad *(peace be upon him)*, Allah's messenger, because – unlike so many rulers before and after him – he meticulously observed and followed himself what he preached to others and demonstrated that Islam, as revealed by Allah, is not some esoteric, aloof philosophy, but a practical guidance, applicable to all people, at all times, and in all areas of life. Amongst the most beautiful aspects of Muhammad's *(peace be upon him)* own life is how perfectly he managed to balance the various demands of public and private life, neglecting neither for the sake of the other. Through his personality and the powerful guidance contained in the *Qur'an* he managed to unite the quarrelling tribes of the Arabian peninsula and lead them to being a major and flourishing civilisation within his own lifetime, putting the then dominant Persian and East Roman empires in the shade. *Islam* soon spread globally and took the cultural lead, advancing science and humanity, giving birth to the European enlightenment, and again, today, providing a much needed spiritual, social, and philosophical ideology for over a billion people, counter-balancing the excess materialism of the prevalent consumerism in the

modern world.

THE QUR'AN – A LIVING MIRACLE

The *Qur'an* is no ordinary book of fact or fiction. It is a living communication to humankind by our Creator, intended as a guidance for life, akin to an instruction manual or a travel guide. It helps us find our way, but it does not do the travelling for us. There were numerous revelations prior to the *Qur'an*, and fragments of those scriptures are still available today, like the Psalms of David (the Zabur of Daud), the Torah (Taurat, the book given to Moses/Musa), or the original gospel of Jesus (the Injil of Isa). However, none of those were recorded in writing at the time of their revelation, and in the process of oral narration, codification and translation, they underwent plenty of alterations and large parts were lost forever. The Qur'an, on the other hand, was preserved in writing each time as and when it was revealed.

The *Qur'an* is in Arabic, a Semitic language with an immaculately preserved syntactical structure, which has led many people to claim that it is not only the language of the people Muhammad *(peace be upon him)* – was sent to as a messenger, but the original language of mankind. Because the *Qur'an*, once revealed, codified the Arabic language, it has remained virtually unchanged, and the classical Arabic of the *Qur'an* is still easy to comprehend for a speaker of modern Arabic. Furthermore, the *Qur'an* uses a fairly simple language which permits readers of all educational backgrounds to feel comfortable and take from it. Nonetheless, a deeper study reveals several layers of meaning in each Ayah (verse, literally: sign) of the *Qur'an*, so that the same sentence, whilst fitting well within its context, also imparts knowledge and information about numerous other issues, personal, social, metaphysic, and so on. Because of this inimical style, which in addition has undeniable poetic qualities, the *Qur'an* contains the challenge that nobody, even with the most advanced help systems available, can ever

produce a single *Surah* (chapter) like it. Those who have tried have failed utterly for yet another reason: The *Qur'an* was not written, edited, and eventually published as is the case with other books. It was revealed portion for portion over a period of 23 years. Each sentence or passage related to a particular event at the time and made sense to the people who heard it for the first time. However, the verses were assigned a particular order by Muhammad *(peace be upon him)*, following the instructions of the angel of revelation, Gabriel (Jibril), and this order is not chronological, yet anybody who reads the *Qur'an* today, with its verses in a totally different order than the one in which they were originally revealed, still finds that the sequence makes perfect sense. So there is the challenge: Write a book made up of contemporary comments over a period of more than two decades, re-arrange them continuously all along until you end up with a whole book which has a flowing narrative and is well interconnected. It can't be done.

To complement the miracle, the *Qur'an* contains knowledge of the past and the future which was not available at the time of its revelation. For example, it mentions that the body of the pharaoh of the Exodus would be preserved as a sign for future generations, yet it was mummified one and a half millennia before Muhammad *(peace be upon him)* on a different continent and not discovered until one and a half millennia afterwards. The *Qur'an* also contains most accurate scientific descriptions of the embryonic stages of human development in the womb or of the orbital movements of planets, all of which was undiscovered for many more centuries to come. In fact, the scientific encouragement of the *Qur'an*, which resulted in the flourishing Muslim rule over Andalusia in Spain until eradicated by the Inquisition, gave birth to the age of enlightenment in Europe which eventually succeeded in spite of the Roman Church's opposition. The social and political concepts of the *Qur'an* were equally advanced: It liberated women from being in the possession of men to being full members of society with property rights and the right to choose their

own husbands, and *Surah at-Taubah* (Repentance) contains the first ever constitution of a state, in this case the city state of *Madinah*, half a millennium before King John, for example, granted limited rights to his subjects in Magna Carta. The concepts contained in the *Qur'an* are so revolutionary that it is not surprising that the *Islamic* faith conquered the ancient world in the shortest possible space of time, putting in the shade the great, but corrupt Persian and East Roman Empires, and once again, as these *Qur'anic* truths are being re-discovered, these ideals provide a balanced and increasingly attractive alternative to the failed ideologies of communism and capitalism.

For people brought up in a Christian or secular tradition, the concept of verbal revelation, that God speaks to man through an angel, is a difficult one. Christianity only concedes that there may be divine inspiration, which makes revelation not much different from intuition. However, the concept of verbal revelation was generally accepted prior to the establishment of the Christian Church. God spoke to Moses and dictated the Ten Commandments. He also told him that there would be raised amongst his brethren (that is the Ishmaelites or Arabs who are the brothers of the Israelites or Hebrews) a prophet like him (that is one who will receive such revelation and be a law-giver). This prophet must undoubtedly be Muhammad *(peace be upon him)*, for Jesus only came to confirm the law, not to change it.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE AFTERLIFE

The key to *Islam's* success in this world is that it aims at the next. This long-term view prevents the adherents of *Islam* to get caught up in the meaningless nitty-gritty of everyday life, setting their aims high and spurned on by an ideal rather than being weighed down by mundane events. For a Muslim, life after death is a certainty, not a possibility. Our existence on earth is temporary, however long we might live: we enter it involuntarily and leave it involuntarily. What we can achieve during

our lifespan is limited, and we can take none of our material acquisitions with us. Life becomes meaningless unless the soul lives on. A believer thus sees the material life as an intermediate stage on a greater journey. It is a test or an examination, for when we return to Allah, our Maker, we will be judged on the basis of how we conducted ourselves during our lifetime. When we begin our life's journey, we are fully equipped by our Creator with the sensual, physical, and mental resources at our disposal, but we need to gradually learn to find our way around in this new environment. As a child grows up it discovers the self, and the demands and desires of the self lead to a life of lust and greed unless moderated by obligations and responsibilities. We learn that others also have similar demands on us as we have on them. *Islam's* teaching reminds us that we cannot repay Allah for His favours, but we can share them with others whenever they are in need of them. Service of Allah thus becomes service of the common good. The *Qur'an* calls its own message a reminder. It reminds us of the bliss of paradise which we had to leave in order to exist on earth. It reminds us that this innocent state can be obtained once more by willingly giving up any selfishness we find in ourselves. Ultimately, we will have to leave everything behind anyway, even our own body, so there is little point in becoming obsessed with worldly accumulations nor the attempt to make our physical appearance last forever. We are more than our physical shell. We are our ideals, our beliefs, our deeds. The wealth we acquire in our lives is merely a tool to help us achieve our ideals. That's why a Muslim is prepared to sacrifice his wealth for the sake of his ideals and is even willing to die for his belief rather than live on betraying it.

Islam teaches that all souls were created long before their physical presence on earth, and that all shall be raised on the Last Day and brought before Allah for judgment. We were told of the test of life when all the souls were gathered initially, and depending on our eagerness or weariness to put ourselves through it, Allah has adjusted

the tribulations of life to what we can manage. He says in the *Qur'an* that no soul is burdened beyond its capacity. Some die in early childhood to save them from what they could not have handled. Life is like an examination room where people enter at different levels. Those who sit the advanced papers might have to stay on longer, and certainly their tasks are more difficult. In the end, as long as we try our best, we will get a mark. On the other hand, if we deny that there is a test and waste our time off-task, we will not be graded. Imagine a car exhibition; it would be boring if all the cars on show would be the same latest model. There will be small and large, fast and slow, luxurious and basic cars in a good exhibition, and a superb car is only recognised as such in comparison to a lesser, or different model. Each and every one of us is equipped with different capabilities. None is worthless. But in the end, you would only buy a car, if it drives. A posh car without an engine will be abandoned in favour of a basic car fit for the job. Equally, in this exhibition of life, whilst we find out more about ourselves by comparing with others, ultimately only those with faith in Him will be accepted by Allah, and the rest will be discarded. The strong believer is better than the weak one, but a weak believer is better than a strong person without faith.

OTHER RELIGIONS

Allah does not accept that people, whom He has made and equipped, should in turn deny Him and His very existence. The religion with Allah has always been *"Islam"*, the voluntary surrender to Him by which man achieves peace with Allah, himself, and his surroundings. Yet, people have frequently altered this one true religion to suit their own needs. Humans have little patience with what they don't understand, and often they try to bring the divine down to earth, making images of God and trying to explain His existence and workings in human terms. The fact remains, however, that whilst Allah knows all about us, we know little about Him other than what He has

made known to us. The creature can never understand the Creator.

Islam upholds the freedom of belief, and the *Qur'an* clearly states that there should be no compulsion in religion. A person's belief is between him and God. However, *Islam* is more than a belief system, it is a religious, moral, social, political, economic ideology, and for that reason it will restrict practices of other faiths where they threaten to undermine its social order and the well-being of its citizens. Certain religious practices, like human sacrifice, for example, will never be permitted, even though adherents of a particular religion may think them justified. Other practices might only be permitted in the privacy of people's homes or places of worship. *Islam* would not tolerate the public display of idols, as these are an insult to Allah, the only God and Creator.

Principally, *Islam* distinguishes two categories of other religions: those of a monotheistic tradition (known as the people of the book, because their religion is based on earlier revealed scriptures), and the polytheists. The public worship of the people of the book, like Jews and Christians, is safeguarded in an *Islamic* society, and their places of worship are protected. Even though Christianity has moved away from the original monotheistic teachings of Jesus, followed Paul in abandoning the laws of the Old Testament, and introduced the Trinity, which became Church doctrine some three centuries after Jesus, Muslims are not permitted to desecrate the crosses which form part of Christian religious expression. The *Qur'an* denies that Jesus died on the cross, Islam does not have a concept of original sin nor the need for its redemption by an innocent, and calling Jesus the son of God is considered blasphemous – nonetheless these matters are left for Jesus himself to sort out when he returns near the end of time. Christian and Jewish communities may also retain their own legal code with regard to personal and family laws and disputes amongst members of their own faith. Public proselytising and attempts to convert Muslims would, however, not be tolerated.

The situation is different with polytheistic religions, for these are considered human inventions. The worship of man-made idols is seen as a degradation of the human spirit, and whilst nobody can be forced to give up superstitions and false beliefs, the public display of such practices is not considered to be conducive to the common good. For the same reason, whilst Islam permits the inter-marriage between Muslims and people of the book, it does not permit Muslims to marry polytheists. This may at first looks appear to be discriminatory, but we do not live in a value-free world, and a marriage of a believer in the one God and an idolater would be even more unworkable than that of a communist and a capitalist, unless, of course their convictions are no more than labels they attach to themselves. For a Muslim, belief is not something you are born with and retain as a birthright. Belief has a practical dimension and is very much reflected in what we do and how we interact with the world around us.

WORSHIP THROUGH ACTION: THE FIVE PILLARS

Islam is real-life-orientated. There is no benefit in a proclaimed faith which does not translate into action. Worship in *Islam* is everything that is done with the intention to serve and please Allah. Before we begin offering additional voluntary service, however, there are some prescribed actions, Allah demands from us. These are traditionally known as the five pillars on which the building of Islam rests: *Shahadah* (declaration of faith), *Salah* (daily prayers), *Saum* (fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan), *Zakah* (a share of one's surplus wealth given to those in need of it), and *Hajj* (the pilgrimage to the Kaabah in Makkah).

SHAHADAH

Except at times of persecution, faith needs to be proclaimed. It is a public statement of one's commitment to the cause. To become a

Muslim, a person needs to make the declaration of faith before at least two witnesses, and to remain a *Muslim*, this commitment must regularly be remembered and renewed. The declaration of faith is that There is no God but Allah (*La ilaha illa-Allah*) and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah (*Muhammad ar-rasul-Allah*) *(peace be upon him)*. The first statement is a clear rejection of all false gods and a recognition that only Allah is worthy of worship and devotion. The second statement acknowledges that we can only learn what Allah wants from us by listening and adhering to the message sent via His messenger Muhammad *(peace be upon him)*, the seal to a long chain of messengers throughout the history of mankind.

SALAH

Theoretical recognition of a Creator and supreme power is not sufficient. When Allah made us, He made us for a purpose, namely to worship Him in the way He designed for us to worship Him. Many people say that they worship God in their own way and that their belief is in their heart, but by taking that view we make ourselves gods and decide how Allah should be worshipped, rather than follow His command. There are five daily prayers in *Islam*, which can be complemented by further voluntary prayers. These prayers involve both the body and the mind and consist of a series of bowings and prostrations together with recitations of the *Qur'an* and of praises of Allah, complemented by personal requests. Those prayers are during the morning twilight before sunrise (Fajr), after the sun has passed its zenith or highest point at noon (Zuhr), mid-afternoon (Asr), after sunset (Maghrib), and after the onset of night ('Isha). These regular prayers serve as an ongoing reminder of our purpose in life and prevent us from straying too far off the path. They are like roll calls or the taking of a register: Just like a factory worker is not considered to be present at work if he does not clock in, or pupils are not recorded as attending if they were not present at registration, the five daily prayers

reaffirm again and again that we are still in the service of Allah.

SAUM

As we go through life, it is easy to become pre-occupied with satisfying our material needs. Some religions institute retreats for a few chosen people who dedicate themselves fully to religious service and renounce the worldly struggle for survival. *Islam* takes a more moderate approach where once a year everybody takes a retreat together. By abstaining from food and drink and intimate sexual relations during daylight hours for the duration of the month of Ramadan, the 9th month of the lunar calendar, and by spending more time during this month in prayer, recitation of the *Qur'an*, and reflection, we train ourselves not to become slaves to our material needs and desires and heighten our awareness of Allah and our spiritual dimension and destiny. Because fasting is a communal affair, with joint fast-breaking in the evenings, it also strengthens the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood regarded as so important in *Islam*. The fasting month is concluded with the festival of *'Id al-Fitr*, prior to which everybody, having learnt the hardships of hunger and thirst, has to give some charity to allow those in need to join in the joy of the celebrations.

ZAKAH

The experience of fasting prepares us for another important *Islamic* principle: that nobody really believes if he fills his stomach whilst his neighbour goes hungry. *Islamic* teachings heighten the awareness of social justice, and the *Islamic* economic system, with its prohibition of interest and usury and its encouragement of fair trading does not condone that some members of society should exploit others or become prosperous at their expense. *Zakah* is one method of penalising the hoarding of wealth, as it places a social obligation on any

surplus wealth not required for daily needs. Once a year every Muslim above the poverty threshold must give 2.5 % of all his belongings which are not in regular use and wealth which has been allowed to accumulate for a whole year to set categories of recipients, those who are needy or without support. Thus both the spending of wealth, rather than its retention, as well as a sense of social responsibility are being encouraged. The *Zakah* is such an important pillar of the *Islamic* belief system, that the *Islamic* state will assign its collection to dedicated *Zakah* collectors, yet it must not be confused with an income tax or a tax to finance government activity. It is a levy on surplus wealth only, and it may only be used for the specified category of needy recipients.

HAJJ

At the annual pilgrimage in *Makkah* a number of rituals are carried out which reflect the efforts of Abraham (Ibrahim), peace be with him, who had left his second wife Hajar and her young son Ishmael (Ismail) there in the arid desert, and Allah rewarded Hajar's struggle to find water with the well of Zamzam, a spring which made the region prosperous and a religious focal point after Ibrahim and Ismail built the Kaabah. There is also the gathering at the plain of Arafat, reminiscent of the even larger gathering to come on the day of judgment. Hajj is more than a get-together of Muslims from all over the globe; it is akin to a virtual reality training camp. Pilgrims leave behind their busy world, dress in simple white sheets of cloth not unlike the ones they will later be buried in, and concentrate on the concept of sacrifice – recalling Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his only son Ismail for Allah. Properly conducted, this simulated journey from this world to the next prepares the pilgrims for the remaining life ahead of them, assisting them in making the right choices and judging their worldly affairs against the standard of the hereafter. All over the Muslim world the conclusion of Hajj is celebrated with the festival of *Eid al-Adha*, the feast of sacrifice, where the meat of a sacrificed animal is shared out between family, friends and the needy,

celebrating the fact, that Allah only tested Ibrahim's willingness, but did not demand of him to give up his son, letting him slaughter a ram instead. Islam thereby categorically rejects the concept of human sacrifice but also emphasises that nothing should be so dear to us that we are not willing to give it up for the sake of Allah.

DIETARY RULES

At the time of the Muslim festival of sacrifice animal rights campaigners often raise their objections claiming that the Muslim way of slaughter is barbaric. Muslims only eat meat where the blood has been allowed to drain fully from the animal's body, and this is achieved by cutting the main artery and windpipe of the animal with a sharp knife, leaving the spinal cord intact. The lack of oxygen to the brain leads to an immediate unconsciousness, and whereas the convulsions which can be seen when the heart pumps out the blood look violent to the onlooker, the animal feels no more pain. Experiments have shown that this method of slaughter, besides ensuring a clean quality of meat free of toxics, is also much less painful to the animal than the prevalent method in Western mass production of meat using stunning or electrocution which, whilst making conveyor belt processing easier and looking more aesthetic to the observer, is both torturous for the animal and results in a harmful build-up of toxics in the meat.

Others, of course, go as far as proclaiming that it is wrong for humans to consume meat at all, stating that this violates the rights of animals. Extremists amongst these groups go as far as attacking and killing people for the perceived protection of animal rights, but they miss a crucial point: Rights must always be balanced by obligations, so if animals were to be afforded equal rights with humans, the must also be tasked with looking after other species, a task they are obviously not capable of. Allah has created the world as a hierarchy. He has given man an exalted position, where all other creatures are subservient to

him, but with it he has the obligation not to abuse his position and not to destroy the world entrusted to him. Those misguided campaigners who consider the consumption of animal meat an excess for human beings, should also logically eradicate all animals which live on the meat of others, as these should not have the right to kill other creatures for food either, and ultimately such a perverted logic would destroy the balance of life and eradicate all the finely tuned ecosystems Allah has created interdependently.

Animal welfare in Islam means that we may utilise animals for food and clothing and to do work for us, but we must adequately look after their needs and avoid excesses. There are categories of animals which are prohibited as food items, including all carnivorous animals and pigs. There are numerous reasons for such prohibitions, which is why hospitals, for example, avoid pork in the diet given to critically ill patients, but generally we understand that Allah has permitted for us what is good and wholesome, and has prohibited what is harmful, even if we don't always have full knowledge of the detailed effects of a substance. Nobody knows our needs better than our Creator Himself.

Islam also forbids the consumption of anything which might interfere with the perception of our senses or blur our judgment, like alcohol or mind-changing drugs. Because we are all responsible for our deeds, we must ensure that we are in the full possession of our mental capacities. When people come under the influence of narcotics, their judgment of their own abilities also becomes flawed, and Islam thus does not leave it to the individual to decide how much of a particular drug he can handle, but demands complete abstinence. It is often said that such prohibition does not work and that it merely leads to the criminalizing of people who will continue taking drugs. This is true where people do not agree with the reasons for a prohibition, and moral education must play a crucial role in this respect. Due to the internalised religious convictions of the members of a sound Islamic

society, society's welfare is usually achieved by self-regulation of its members rather than by policing them.

GENDER RELATIONS AND THE CENTRALITY OF FAMILY LIFE

This equally holds true for *Islam's* endeavours to regulate sexual activity and elevate the ideals of chastity and modesty with regards to gender relations. There is no denying the need to satisfy human sexual desires beyond the pure purpose of procreation, and Islam does not advocate celibacy and complete abstinence. To create a safe family environment, however, where children can grow up trusting and supported by both parents, *Islam* insists that two partners should only have a sexual relationship after they have committed themselves to each other through marriage, and in order to minimise temptation *Islam* restricts the opportunities for improper approaches and intimacy by advocating a modest dress code when in public and stating that an unmarried man and woman must never be left alone in private. The selection of a suitable marriage partner should be based on faith and character, rather than the fading qualities of beauty and wealth, and parents and the wider society play a crucial role in helping young people find the right partner, but nobody must be forced to marry someone they cannot love. As incompatibilities do not always become apparent until after some time, *Islam* permits divorce after all efforts of reconciliation have failed.

In certain circumstances, but not as the norm, it also permits a man to marry more than one woman – limiting the total number of wives he may have to four – so as to protect a wife from being abandoned in favour of another. The moral outrage at this by modern secularists is hypocritical, as they do not at all limit the number of side-step partners a person may have outside marriage, but do not afford any of them proper rights as a partner. *Islam* insists that where a man has more than one wife, he must treat them financially and with regard to the time he

spends with and the care he gives each of them equally, emphasising that this is an almost impossible task. No woman should simply be used for the sexual gratification of a man without any obligation for her upkeep and continuing welfare. Whilst there is a conditional acceptance of polygamy in *Islam*, a woman may not have more than one husband, as this would make it extremely difficult for a child to know who his or her father is.

Unlike feminism, which claims to improve the situation of women by forcing them to compete with men, *Islam* holds both men and women in equal esteem and emphasises their equal worth before Allah, but recognises that they are physically and emotionally different and play different parts in society. Whilst a woman may work or conduct her own business, she is not obliged to cater for her husband and family. She comes under the husband's protection who must provide for her according to his means. Women and men have their own circles and social gatherings and further interact with each other in the extended family setting. The *Islamic* concept of gender relations can be described as complementary rather than competitive.

REFORM AND JUSTICE

What has been described so far is, of course, the *Islamic* ideal, and it would be dishonest to pretend that Muslim practice at all times corresponds to this. Muslims, like all people, are fallible and have shortcomings. Traditions often develop over time which may have been influenced by many other, usually cultural, factors and are perceived by a society as *Islamic* norms when they have no basis in the original guidance provided by the *Qur'an* and the example set out by the messenger. Like any other society, Muslim society is also in need of constant reform.

The *Islamic* legal code, know as the *Shariah*, takes account of this. Islamic law is made up of some unchangeable principles based on which solutions are found for legal problems, taking changing

circumstances into account. There are various methods for arriving at such solutions, for example analogy, where a situation is compared to a similar one for which an answer already exists. Islam also acknowledges that the ideal solution can't always be found, and therefore uses a method of reconciling various options by weighing up their benefits and disadvantages. This flexibility on the one hand, with a permanent value system on the other, ensures that Islam is neither so fluid that it can mean all things to all people, nor so rigid that it does not keep up with new challenges as time progresses.

The *Islamic* worldview does not look for perfection on earth. This means that there is always room for improvement, implying an ongoing process of reform. A society which stops reforming itself and trying to get closer to its ideals will become stagnant and will have to give way to more dynamic forces taking it over. Even though Islam is based on the complete revelation of Allah valid for all times to come, Islamic society is continually in need of regeneration – a commitment which does not leave room for complacency. The recent decline of Islam in the world during the era of Western colonialism shows the consequences of failing to realise that Islam is a process and not a state. The post-colonial revival of Islam in our own times, however, shows equally that the sources of Islam are intact and capable of generating the dynamics required for rejuvenating the Islamic message and practice.

THE BALANCE

One of the key philosophical concepts of Islam is that of the balance. Allah has created everything in perfect balance, but over time this balance is lost as a result of our collective actions. The task for humanity, and first and foremost the believers, is to re-establish the balance. *Islam* thus avoids excesses and extremism and has in the *Qur'an* been described as the middle way belonging to a moderate community. The history of Muslim societies shows various movements

which arose as counter-balance and in response to the particular direction society was going at a given time in history. It is therefore short-sighted to claim that one or the other train of thought is the only legitimate one. They are facets of a mosaic, and each of them had an important contribution to make as interpretations of a given set of prevalent circumstances. As we progress through human history, the accumulated wealth of the answers humanity found to the problems it faced should enable us to learn from past experiences and fine-tune our future responses to human dilemmas.

REWARD, PUNISHMENT AND JUDGMENT

We share our world with countless contemporaries with whom we interact, yet essentially we face our destiny alone. Our actions may have an immediate effect, but often we do not see the fruits of our work within our own lifespan. In the scheme of creation we are not judged by our results, but by our intentions. We have no choice in the situations we are faced with, we do not determine our time and place of birth, nor the majority of events which we witness through our lifetime, and we have no say in the time and place of our death. But during each situation we encounter we are given the choice of our own reaction and contribution. Upon return to Allah, having left the material world behind, we are judged on the basis of the motivation of these actions of ours. Where we acted in order to serve Allah and benefit our surroundings, we will be rewarded with Allah's pleasure and acceptance, and where we rebelled against Him and harmed our surroundings, we will be punished with His anger and rejection.

The descriptions of paradise and hell in the *Qur'an* are vivid, using a language which we can understand based on our own experiences. Ultimately, however, no amount of imagination of ours will enable us to pre-empt the rewards and punishments of the hereafter. What matters is the knowledge that our life after death is eternal and the state in which we enter it – as a trusting believer or as a rebelling disbeliever

– will last forever. We will not be given a second chance. Our afterlife depends on our conduct in this world and whether we aim to get closer to Allah or loose sight of His presence.

TIME AND SPACE / HISTORY, PRESENT AND FUTURE

For Allah, the barriers of time and space do not exist. Due to the limitation of our senses and knowledge, we can only perceive a partial truth and can only measure analytically by singling out some processes from others. We can never have a complete overview coupled with detailed knowledge of all existence. From the Creator's perspective, the created world exists in a time-space-continuum. For Him the past is as transparent as the present and the future. He knows what we are still to discover.

From a simplistic mechanical view of the universe, via quantum physics, science is gradually moving to an understanding called the "many worlds theory", which is more akin to the *Islamic* concept of the worlds created by the Lord of the Worlds. There can be only one origin and destination, Allah. Everything else is in motion, be it the cycle of life or the planetary orbits, which is expressed through the circular movement of pilgrims around the *Kaabah*. Only Allah's view of the world is complete, that of any of His creatures is relative depending on their position. For Allah the creation of the worlds is accomplished and the destiny of everything decided. We do, however, perceive ourselves in possession of free will and are judged in accordance with the decisions we take. We thereby create our own world and our own destiny within given parameters. The "many worlds theory" explains this concept by saying that different worlds exist in superposition, that is they are possible, but only one of them will become reality for an observer at any one time.

Allah has equipped us with potential, but we will not fulfil all of it. As we discover who we are and what we can do, we also limit our

subsequent options by the decisions we have already taken. Because our lifespan is finite, we must focus on our aim if we want to reach it. The only direct link between two points is straight line. The Qur'an calls the journey of the believer back to Allah the straight path. If time were infinite, it would not matter in which direction we set out to reach a particular destination, we would eventually end up there. Time, however, is limited, and if we stray too far, we might not be able to make it back. The model of the straight path therefore implies that we must make regular small course corrections as soon as we deviate from it. Islam calls this concept repentance.

It should by now be clear that Islam uses a wholesome and synthetic, rather than an analytical approach. It is a complete praxis-oriented worldview which provides guidance for the individual, rules for social interaction, and a satisfactory answer to the question of the purpose of our existence. To Allah we belong, and to Him we return. Man only obtains what He strives for, and his effort will soon be apparent. His deeds will be judged by their intention. For those who limit their horizon to the material world surrounding us, life is not much more than play and time-pass. For those who raise their sights to the next stage of existence, it becomes a temporary and intermediary stage and testing ground, whose importance lies only in the fact that Allah does not waste the effort of the believers. "Nature" has its rules for the benefit of our orientation, and similarly there are set rules and rituals to help us through our daily lives. Our senses take in information which our mind processes, and in this way we ensure our bodily survival. The survival of the soul, on the other hand, depends on the measure of faith our hearts contain.

Islam balances the demands of this world and the next, the physical and the metaphysical. It has its own philosophy, value system, social order, political economy, and so on, but ultimately it is a system of guidance tailored specifically for us, the human race, each and

everyone of us, individually and collectively, time-travellers in our own universe.

THE ISSUE OF TERROR

Attacking Islam is not a new trend. From as early as the age of the crusades, the west's information about Muslims and their outlook towards the treatment of followers of other faiths have always been made to look at best, barbaric. Only until relatively recent times has this overview changed to that of a more truthful and fairer nature.

> *"The accounts of Muhammad and Islam which were published in Europe before the beginning of the 19th century are now being regarded as literary curiosities."*
>
> Prof. Bevan in the Cambridge Mediaeval History.

Islam teaches a universal brotherhood to its followers and a unique tolerance to followers of other faiths, as has been previously mentioned. It is the decree of Allah:

> *"The believers are nothing else than brothers. So make reconciliations between your brothers, and fear Allah so that you may receive mercy."*
>
> The Holy Qur'an: Al-Hujaraat 10.

The thoroughness of the rights that have been divinely bestowed upon one and all, has commanded respect from even those who are universally considered patrons of human rights as well as those considered to be influential to modern thought.

> *"I wanted to know the best of the life of one who holds today undisputed sway over the hearts of Millions of mankind... I became more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam in those days in the scheme of life..."*
>
> *Mahatma Ghandi, 16th September 1924*

"The Principle of Universal brotherhood and the doctrine of equality of mankind which he proclaimed represent very great contribution of Muhammad to the social uplift of humanity. All great religions have also preached the same doctrine, but the prophet of Islam had put this theory into actual practice and its value will be fully recognised, perhaps, sometime hence, when international consciousness being awakened, racial prejudices would disappear and a stronger concept of the brotherhood of humanity comes into existence."

Prof. Ramakrishna Rao,
Muhammed the Prophet of the Desert. Page 7.

We can thus understand that the original precept taught in Islam is that of peace and mutual respect.

The issue that will now be undoubtedly troubling many of us would be that of Jihad. This word has been very poorly translated as "Holy War" by many sensationalist newspapers, and sad to say, dictionaries. The infinitive of this word means "to struggle, exert, make effort" and includes within it, an awesome array of worship, which even includes self-rectification.

But yes, undeniably the word would also be inclusive of the meaning of fighting for the cause of the Allah. While this may seem extreme to many, if held in comparison to generally acceptable reasons for war then the concept of it can be understood and accepted.
There will be very few individuals who would not agree to the concept of self-defence. The principle of Jihad is the same. There are many who are prepared to fight, kill and die for king and country, many also for the mere reasons of increasing the well-being and life-style of their home country. Jihad is much more noble than that, as it is neither fought for one's country, nor for acquisition of wealth or land, and not even for a particular ideology especially not that of propagating Islamic

ideology, as this has been forbidden by Allah, Himself. Jihad is a self-defensive means to protect the religion and the worshipers of Allah, their properties, dignity and well-being from any onslaught. Jihad will only adopt those measures necessary to ward off the attack. If anyone were to reject these principles and still claim to be performing Jihad, Islam says that they are not truthful in their claim, nor are they representing Islam.

Simply put, if you were to attack me, I morally and also according to Islam would be justified in defending myself and even in retaliating, to the extent of the attack. Just because you and your friends may after attacking me claim it was justified or even claim it did not happen would not change my moral or Islamic standing. This is what is happening on a world level, as the advance of secularism forces away the Islamic way of life of its subjects, why would Islam not be justified in trying to defend its people from this forceful take over by adopting those very same methods as what it is made subject to.

While this publication may be supporting the concept of Jihad it under no circumstances supports terrorism. The loss of innocent human life be it from the opposition's side is never tolerated in Islam. To such an extent that Islam would never brush such actions aside for the greater good, or as a mistake, or even "collateral damage", but the perpetrators of such actions, would be subject to punishment, not merely an apology or a chance to justify themselves by clever wording.

The issue of "suicide" bombings does not escape the label of "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter".

The picture portrayed by pro-Israel media would obviously portray the status quo of Palestine to be Muslim instigated and Muslim sustained, (or nowadays not to appear too offensive, Arab instigated and Arab sustained). Images of angry young "blood-thirsty" Palestinian men, have on many occasions featured on front pages, showing one and all,

how these “animals” want all Jews dead. Jewish hatred towards Palestinians, if the above was the full argument, would be justified.

But behind the prevailing media façade the truth is quite different. If observed from a neutral point of view, one would cognize, that since the post Second World War influx of Jewish settlers in Palestine, the locals have had a very hard task trying to accommodate the increasing demands of the immigrants, who with foreign help have since usurped not only the power of the locals to rule themselves, nor merely denied them the rights of living a normal dignified life, but also they have denied the original inhabitants of their newly (not to mention forcefully) acquired homeland, the basic necessities of a peoples' existence.

> “According to a study funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), “the Palestinian Territories, and especially the Gaza Strip, face a distinct humanitarian emergency in regard to ... malnutrition”. ...Over 22 percent of children under 5 are now suffering from malnutrition and 15.6 per cent from acute anaemia...More than half of Palestinian households are now eating only once per day”.
>
> UN Report on Palestine E/CN.4/2004/10/Add.2 page 2
>
> “The Special Rapporteur found that, although the Government of Israel, as the Occupying Power in the Territories, has the legal obligation under international law to ensure the right to food of the civilian Palestinian population, it is failing to meet this responsibility. Security measures, including curfews, road closures, permit systems and security checkpoints, are severely restricting the movement of people and economic trade, impeding physical and economic access to food and water and causing economic collapse. The continued confiscation and destruction of Palestinian land and

water resources is also reducing the capacity of the Palestinians to be able to feed themselves and amounts to the gradual dispossession of the Palestinian people. The building of the security fence/apartheid wall through Palestinian land is also threatening the right to food of thousands of Palestinians, leaving many Palestinians separated from their lands or imprisoned by the winding route of the fence/wall or in the closed military zone along the edge of the fence/wall".

UN Report on Palestine E/CN.4/2004/10/Add.2 page 3

The above are just extracts from one report. There are literally countless reports which highlight the horrific disregard of human rights of not unwanted visitors, but the local Palestinians. These and other horrendous crimes justify Jihad, against the Israeli militia, for the Palestinian people, to stop the onslaught that they face.

But does this justify attacking civilians?

An argument that Israel uses that always places the finger of blame on the Palestinians, is that their attacks are on civilians, which is wrong fullstop. This statement, although to a degree is correct, is incomplete. It should read:

"If Israel('s military, public and government) stops subjugating Palestinian civilians to; ethnic cleansing (which is synonymous to mass murder), barbaric torture, inhumane laws and regulations which equate to death, and humiliating acts induced by racial hatred, then the Palestinian action of suicide bombing as a desperate means of a self-defencive deterrent of a despairing nation, is wrong fullstop."

The bitter truth is that the down-trodden Palestinians are resorting to the last item in an inventory of measures which have not succeeded in trying to quell the fancies of the forced powers. Desperate acts like throwing stones at tanks which have not achieved desired results, have

screamed out the need of acting in a way that will, if not achieve the results wished for, at least show the opposition that if you dare kill thousands of our children through your inhumane ways, then we will take away the lives of a few dozen of your civilians as a means of retaliation.

Yes, attacking civilians is wrong, but what is the greater wrong here? Is it the killing of a few dozen people, by means of a swift death, or is it the constant terrorizing of a nation by means of indiscriminate mass-murder (young, old, women, sick, all civilians), harsh sanctions which slowly suffocates a nation on to the verge of extinction, and the starving of all Muslims to create in effect a racist economic holocaust?

Islam does not teach Muslims to hate people of different religions. History bears testimony to this. Islam wants peace, as it's name implies. But Islam, as everyone else, acknowledges the saying "to want peace be prepared for war".